

Neurosis #9

So here I am. We're somewhere over a dark patch in the middle of the country and I'm in the window seat in the last row in the plane. The guy in front of me's leaning all the way back, but I'm in the last row so my seat doesn't go back, and I have to lift my legs up to stretch out a muscle that was sitting funny while I was asleep. So here I sit, scrunched up in the the last row of the plane, my thighs hugged against my chest, my knees digging into the seat in front of me, my back curved funny from being unable to recline. But that's not the problem.

No, the problem is that I am terribly, almost unbearably, thirsty. My mouth has been dry for hours, we're long past that. Now I'm so thirsty that the color has drained from my face, because there simply is no fluid left to keep it there. I am so thirsty that it's beginning to feel like there's no water around to hydrate my brain so my neocortex is getting and shrivelling up. It's an odd feeling, your brain shriveling up. It makes it hard to think. But I guess that's not really the problem either.

The problem, the real problem I suppose, is that I can't ask for anything to drink. I am perfectly justified — I was asleep during the drink service, I am quite terribly thirsty, my flight is unusually uncomfortable to begin with — yet I cannot bring myself to do it. As the flight attendants walk briskly by, I fail to catch their eyes. And the a man sitting in the seat next to me on the aisle has headphones on, so I can't exactly interrupt him. I could ring my flight attendant call button, but I've never quite been able to bring myself to do that. I'm so close to the flight attendants anyway.

If I rang the call button, I tell myself, I wouldn't ask for a Sprite. I'd just ask for water. Asking for a Sprite, it'd seem like I was interrupting them just so I could get my soda fix. Like I was some sort of petulant child who had to have his soda and was going to throw a temper tantrum if they didn't get it. Like a troublemaker, the kind of person they look down on. But water? Water they'd understand: it was a genuine medical request, a normal, physical human need. Something totally worth taking the extraordinary step of pressing the flight attendant call button.

But I can't bring myself to do it. It seems like such an imposition.

This, I suppose, is the actual problem: I feel my existence is an imposition on the planet. Not a huge one, perhaps, not a huge one at all, but an imposition nonetheless. When I go to a library and I see the librarian at her desk reading, I'm afraid to interrupt her, even though she sits there specifically so that she may be interrupted, even though being interrupted by for reasons like this by people like me is her very job. At the fast food restaurant, I feel embarrassed taking time to pick through my pocket for appropriate change, so I always give them whole bills, then feel embarrassed when they have to take the time to count *me* out change. When someone asks me what high school I'm going to, I feel awkward explaining to them that I've gone to high school and to college and then started a company and sold it, so I just stutter a bit and then tell them that my high school is outside of Chicago.

I realize this is neurotic. Maybe not the high school thing, maybe that's just politeness, but certainly the thing right now, the brain shriveling with the knees digging and yet still the fear of asking for some water. "This is neurotic, Aaron," I say to myself. "You are being neurotic. It is not normal to be this shy. And geez, certainly you of all people have little justification for being so undemanding."

I am a good person, I mean. I work hard, I happily pay my taxes, I think of ways to make the world a better place, I always look the woman behind the counter in the eye and say "thank you, thank you," as if I really mean it, as if I really do appreciate the effort it took for her punch my order into her cash register and withdraw the right amount of change. And I do! So I deserve this, I deserve my glass of water, my can of soda. I am not like one of those people who goes around robbing banks and mugging old ladies and then stands in front of me in the supermarket line, throwing a tantrum about how dare the clerk not accept my credit card. No, *I* am perfectly justified in asking for a glass of water. I know all this, and yet, somehow, I still feel like an imposition.

Normally, it's not so bad feeling this way. Normally, I just sit in my quiet little room and do the small things that bring me pleasures. I read my books, I answer email, I write a little bit. I'm not such a nuisance to the world, and the kick I get out of living can, I suppose, justify the impositions I make on it. But when life isn't so fun, well, then I start to wonder. What's the point of going on if it's just trouble for us both?

My friends will miss me, I am told. And I guess it's somewhat better around friends. For some reason asking them for things doesn't seem quite so bad. Perhaps we've established some rapport, perhaps I feel I've given *them* enough to justify my small requests, perhaps I feel like my friends are special people who think along the same lines I do and thus understand my needs. (Inner critic: "Yeah, only a fellow genius would understand your special need for *water*. Jesus, what a dweeb.") But even so, I feel reticent. Even among my closest friends, I still feel like something of an imposition, and the slightest shock, the slightest hint that I'm correct, sends me scurrying back into my hole.

I know, I know, I'm wrong, I'm wrong to feel this way. My friends love me. They remark, spontaneously, about how nice it is to have me around. They invite me over to their houses to hang out. Indeed, at this very moment, two of my very favorite people to hang out with are actually fighting — fighting! — over the supposed privilege of having me live with them. "I just want to point out," one says, "that I have never tickled you." "I just want to point out," replies the other, "that I have never gotten you to attach clothespins to your face."

Clearly, rationally, I am in the wrong. These people like me. (Inner cynic: "If only to have someone around to tickle and pinch.") No, no, they genuinely like me. But the idea that people might actually *want* to be around me takes an amazing amount of getting used to. Last night, for the first time, I invited some people over to my apartment. I've never done this before. But, to my amazement, they all came. They even brought their friends. I ran out of chairs. The idea that a group of people would want to come over to see me was kind of stunning. Someone even brought wine.

OK, so perhaps there is a small group of people who, whether through quirks of genetics or some childhood trauma, appear, as best as I can tell, to actively enjoy my company. (Inner elitist: "Or just need excuses to drink wine?") But this does not excuse my impositions on the store clerk, the librarian, the man inquiring after my high school who I downright lied to — *lied* to! — just to avoid pointing out the error of his preconceptions, the bus driver who I had to distract with my inability to use the new stored-value payment machines, or the waiter at that restaurant I went to the other day who, I later realized to my endless mortification, I forgot to properly tip. (Waiter, if you're out there, please send me your address so I can mail you your tip! I'm so sorry!) These people did not request the dubious pleasure of my company. I have no justification for bothering them with my requests.

Oh, but you know, I really want some water...

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